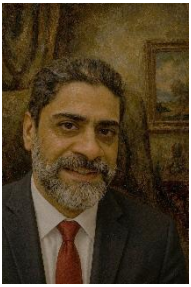

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The Creation of the World and the Problem of Time

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When we project the structure of time onto our conception of God in discussing the origin of the world, much of the difficulty arises from a hidden assumption that slips into the mind until it seems self-evident. We imagine eternity as an infinite stretch of time in which moments succeed one another just as they do in our world. We then ask: Why did God create the world at this particular moment rather than another, if His will is eternal? What singled out this moment for creation ?

The question already contains a prior conception: that there was an extended time before the world, that countless moments passed without creation occurring, and that a particular moment finally arrived in which the world came into existence. This is the first point at which the problem arises. Eternity does not mean an infinitely long period stretching backward without a beginning; it means that God's existence has no beginning. We therefore cannot properly imagine hours, days, or empty ages behind the world during which God existed while the world did not, and then ask why creation did not occur during

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them. Ibn Taymiyya drew attention to this point when he regarded the times imagined by the mind before the world as hypothetical times with no existence outside the mind.

If time is not an independently existing container outside the world and its events, then it is illegitimate to assume an empty time preceding creation and then measure how long creation was delayed within it. Likewise, speaking of an eternal will does not mean that a decision was made at an earlier moment and its execution was postponed. The very notion of temporal delay presupposes a time already existing before the world, which is precisely what must first be established.

Yet behind this temporal illusion there remains a genuine metaphysical problem concerning the relation between an eternal will and an act that comes into being. This problem emerged clearly in the dispute between theologians and philosophers.

The theologians, most prominently Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, held that God is eternal and without beginning, while the world came into existence and therefore has a beginning. The eternal divine will, they argued, determined that the world should exist at the point at which it began. They did not mean that God eternally intended to create and that the realization of His intention was then delayed. Their claim was that the eternal will was directed toward the existence of the world at the very boundary from which its own time began. In this way they avoided imagining a temporal interval preceding the fulfillment of the divine will. The philosophical objection,

however, then shifted elsewhere: why was this particular boundary singled out for existence rather than another?

If the answer is that the will itself selected it, the philosopher asks what such selection means if all the hypothetical alternatives are equally possible. Selection, on this view, appears to require some basis that explains why one possibility was preferred. If one instead appeals to some newly occurring act or condition, the question simply reappears concerning that new factor and its relation to the eternal will. This is the source of the famous problem of determination: the disagreement became a dispute about the nature of will itself and about whether free choice requires a determining reason beyond the will.

This was a major part of the philosophers' objection. Ibn Rushd was among the strongest critics of the theological account. In his view, a will that selects one of two completely equal possibilities without anything distinguishing one from the other creates a rational difficulty. Merely referring the selection back to the will does not end the question if the meaning of will itself remains in need of explanation.

Avicenna had approached the problem through a different framework. He connected the emanation of beings with God's knowledge of the most perfect order and understood divine will in a manner quite different from temporal choice between equally available alternatives. In his system, the existence of the world belongs to an order eternally known by God.

Determination therefore does not take the form of a newly arising will that passes from refraining from action to acting.

Ibn Rushd, for his part, rejected the very conception that makes the relation between God and the world resemble a human act occurring after a period of abstention or delay. God, in his account, is perpetually active, and the world is related to this activity in such a way that there can be no empty time devoid of all divine action followed by the beginning of action. Consequently, the eternity of the world in his philosophy does not mean that an infinite period of time elapsed before a moment of creation. The very idea of a first moment of creation in that sense is precisely what he rejects.

This approach has an obvious strength: the question "Why now?" disappears if there is no first moment at which a transition occurred from inactivity to activity. Yet the solution carries a philosophical cost. The more strongly the relationship between God and the world is described in terms of permanence and necessary connection, the narrower the space seems to become for a concept of choice according to which acting and not acting are genuinely possible alternatives. Much of the dispute therefore centered on the difference between a free agent and a permanent cause, and on whether perpetual activity can be reconciled with genuine choice.

Ibn Taymiyya later agreed with part of the philosophers' criticism while rejecting their conclusion. He considered the idea of a divine being eternally devoid of action, from whom action subsequently began without any newly willed divine

act, to involve a real difficulty. At the same time, he refused to solve that difficulty by affirming that one particular world is eternally coexistent with God. Instead, he maintained that God has always been active according to His will, and that the general continuity of His acts and of created events need not have a beginning, even though every particular act and every particular creature comes into existence after previously not existing.

This view therefore affirms continuity in the kind of divine action without affirming the eternity of any individual act. It allows for a succession of events without a first member. The perpetual character of divine activity does not entail that any particular act or creature is eternal. Every creature comes into existence, while the succession of created events as such need not terminate in a first event preceded by absolute inactivity. The view thus attempts to combine perpetual divine activity with the originated character of created things: it neither makes this particular world eternal nor makes divine action follow an infinite period of inactivity.

It is important not to understand this position as affirming an actually completed infinite collection of beings existing simultaneously. What it affirms is an ongoing succession of events, each one of which comes into existence. Continuity belongs to activity and renewal, not to the permanent existence of any particular creature.

This model also possesses an obvious strength. It avoids part of the theological problem of explaining why one particular

beginning was selected, while preserving a conception of action and choice that may appear weakened in some philosophical models. Yet it opens the problem of an infinite regress into the past. Can a succession of events extend backward without a beginning? Is a past infinity possible in reality, or must reason require the series to terminate in a first event?

A subtler question then arises concerning the will itself. If individual divine acts occur successively, how is this succession related to the divine will? Ibn Taymiyya affirms freely chosen divine acts that occur according to God's will. In this he differs from the majority of theologians, who resist attributing newly occurring acts to the divine essence. The problem therefore shifts from the beginning of action to the nature of freely chosen divine attributes and to the relation between divine constancy and the succession of divine acts.

Underlying the disagreement about the beginning of the world is an even deeper disagreement concerning the perfection of divine agency. The theologians saw the perfection of divine transcendence as requiring that no newly occurring acts arise in God, and they considered the eternal will sufficient to determine events at their appropriate times. Ibn Taymiyya, by contrast, held that the permanence of divine perfection does not require action to remain eternally fixed in one form. The perfection of free agency consists in God doing what He wills when He wills, so that particular acts occur successively according to His will while His power and agency remain perpetual. The dispute therefore extends to the very meaning

of divine action and to which conception is more appropriate to a perfect and free agent.

Alongside these different approaches to the origin of the world—those of the theologians, the philosophers, and Ibn Taymiyya—later philosophical traditions developed further interpretations of what it means for the world to "come into being." Twelver philosophical thought did not approach the issue in a single way. Many of its theologians broadly followed the theological approach in affirming that the world has a beginning and that God acts freely, although they differed among themselves and from other theologians over the interpretation of will and the divine attributes. Its philosophers, however, developed other frameworks that reconsidered the very meaning of origination.

Mir Damad proposed the idea of **atemporal origination**, distinguishing temporal precedence from a deeper, metatemporal form of precedence. The world's origination, in his account, does not mean that an empty period of time preceded it and that the world then appeared at some point within that period. It means a kind of precedence by nonexistence situated at a level beyond ordinary temporal succession. This nonexistence does not occur within a time older than the world and does not stretch through a period preceding it. Mir Damad therefore distinguished ordinary time, which measures the succession of changing things, from a metatemporal level in which the world can be said to be preceded by nonexistence without requiring an earlier temporal interval.

Mulla Sadra later moved the problem in another direction through his doctrine of substantial motion. The natural world, on this account, is undergoing continuous existential renewal. Origination is therefore no longer merely an event that occurred once at the first moment of the universe; it becomes a continuing feature of a world whose very existence is dynamic and renewed. At every moment, the world exists anew.

These approaches show that the disagreement concerns more than whether the world has a beginning. It extends to the meanings of time, origination, and precedence themselves. Is precedence a temporal precedence by nonexistence? Is it an ontological or metatemporal precedence beyond ordinary time? Or is origination a continuous renewal built into the structure of the world?

The theologian regards time itself as created along with the world, gives the world a beginning, and makes the divine will the principle that determines that beginning. Ibn Taymiyya affirms that every individual creature comes into existence while the general succession of divine acts and created events need not have a beginning; he therefore connects time with the succession of acts and events and has no need for an empty temporal interval preceding them. Mir Damad affirms a kind of origination that does not require temporal precedence and distinguishes three levels: timeless eternity, metatemporal duration, and ordinary time. Mulla Sadra makes time a

dimension dependent upon substantial motion and therefore places renewal within the very structure of the world.

Despite their differences, none of these approaches requires us to imagine time as an independently existing eternal container lying behind the world, filled with equivalent moments until creation happens in one of them rather than another.

Clarifying this point is essential before moving to the deeper metaphysical question of divine agency, will, and choice. The question "At what moment within an earlier time did creation occur?" can only be addressed after asking what divine agency means in the first place. How are divine choice and the constancy of divine perfection to be understood together? How can will and choice relate to a world that either begins or is continually renewed without assuming an independently existing time behind it? Is the eternal will sufficient to explain the world's coming into existence, or does the reality of agency require successively willed acts, or should the meaning of origination itself be reconstructed so that the problem no longer concerns a first moment at all?

If we return to the three principal approaches around which the preceding dispute has revolved, we find that each pays a different philosophical price. The theologian preserves both a beginning of the world and divine choice, but must confront the problem of determination. The philosopher who understands the relation between God and the world in terms of the permanent relation between cause and effect preserves the continuity of divine agency but faces the problem of

freedom and necessity. Ibn Taymiyya combines the continuity of divine action with the origination of every particular creature, but must confront the problems of an infinite succession and of successive divine acts. Later theories, such as atemporal origination and substantial motion, reformulate the meaning of origination itself and therefore do not fit neatly into this threefold comparison.

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The Illusion in the Temporal Question

Even with these metaphysical difficulties remaining, it is essential to distinguish them from another question with which they are frequently confused: if God is eternal and the world has a beginning, did an endless duration pass before the world existed without any creation taking place? And why did the world begin at this point rather than at some supposedly earlier point?

Two questions that appear similar must be distinguished. Asking why the world began to exist and how the divine will relates to its beginning is a genuine metaphysical question. Asking why creation did not occur at an earlier time, however, already assumes the existence of an extended time preceding the world, within whose different parts creation could have occurred. If no such prior time existed, the second question loses its object, while the first remains and still requires examination.

The temporal question turns nonexistence into an extended duration, as though behind the universe there were an endless cosmic night whose ages passed until a particular moment

arrived and creation began. If time itself belongs to the world, this image collapses at its foundation. There is no temporal "before" by which the amount of any supposed delay could be measured.

For the world to have a beginning does not necessarily imply any temporal delay in divine action. If time itself has a beginning, then the first moment of the world is also the first moment of its time. There is no earlier moment in which creation could have occurred or from which it could have been delayed. Asking "Why did God not create before that?" resembles asking for a location outside the very domain that makes location possible in the first place.

It is therefore useful to distinguish two senses of "before." The first is temporal precedence, which requires succession and has meaning only within time. The second is ontological or explanatory precedence: the priority of a cause over that which depends upon it. God is prior to the world in the sense that the world depends upon Him for its existence. This does not require a measurable period of time between God and the world.

This distinction removes the illusion of a temporal extension preceding creation, but it does not by itself settle every issue surrounding the world's origin. Questions remain concerning whether time can have a beginning, how an eternal will relates to a world with a beginning, and whether an infinite succession of past events is possible. What disappears is one particular

form of the question: the image of eternity as an endlessly long time preceding the world.

The approaches examined above converge in rejecting the naive picture of time as an independently existing eternal container standing outside the world and its events. The temporal question cannot legitimately be constructed on the assumption that time stretches independently beyond the world, containing equivalent moments until creation occurs in one rather than another.

The issue is broader than merely asserting that time has a beginning. If time has a beginning, then there is no earlier time beyond that beginning in which one could ask why creation failed to occur. If, alternatively, events or motion extend backward without a first member, then there is no first boundary whose selection requires explanation. In either case, the ontological question remains: how are divine agency and will related to the world, and what do origination and choice actually mean?

The dispute can therefore be reduced to three basic questions:

1) The nature of time: Is time an eternal extension existing in its own right, like an external container in which events succeed one another, or does it depend upon motion, change, and events and therefore possess no independent existence apart from them?

2) The nature of divine action and its relation to eternity: Does God's eternity require an unchanging state in which no new acts occur, while the eternal will determines events at their respective times? Or does the perfection of agency require perpetual action and choice without dependence upon a first temporal beginning?

3) The relation between what begins and what is eternal: How can an eternal will relate to something that comes into existence at a particular boundary without implying a change in God or the arbitrary preference of one possibility without a determining basis?

Once the dispute is reduced to these foundations, it becomes clear that the disagreements among these schools and traditions reflect different metaphysical models of time, eternity, divine agency, and the relation between what is eternal and what comes into being.

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In modern philosophy the problem took another form in Immanuel Kant, who made the question of the world's beginning one of the antinomies of pure reason. When reason tries to consider the world as an absolute totality, it can construct an argument that the world must have had a beginning in time, and then construct an opposing argument that it cannot have had a beginning. Kant regarded the dilemma as arising when reason goes beyond the limits of possible experience and treats time as though it were a property

belonging to things as they are in themselves, whereas in his philosophy time is an a priori form of human perception.

Seen from this angle, the problem acquires a deeper dimension. Human beings can scarcely conceive anything except within extension and order: before and after, beginning and end, cause followed by effect. Yet when we try to think about the origin of time itself, we employ the very instrument whose origin we are attempting to explain. We ask what came "before" the before and search for a time that preceded time.

Modern cosmology provides an intriguing scientific version of this difficulty. Within the standard cosmological model, we can trace the history of the universe back toward an extremely hot and dense early state, while the meaning of time itself becomes increasingly complicated as we approach the earliest limits of the model. Some well-known physical proposals, including those associated with Stephen Hawking, have suggested that asking what happened before the beginning of time may resemble asking what lies north of the North Pole: the sentence is grammatically intelligible, but it assumes an extension that may not exist.

Physics, however, should not be made to carry more than it can bear. The Big Bang model does not by itself settle the metaphysical question of whether the world is eternal or originated, and contemporary cosmological models do not all agree that time has an absolute beginning. Its relevance to this discussion lies elsewhere: modern cosmology demonstrates that a question about what existed "before" the universe may

rest upon extending the concept of time into a domain where it no longer applies in its familiar form.

This returns us to the heart of the problem. The classical debate was never a single problem. It combined several distinct questions: Does the world have a beginning? Does time have a beginning? Can there be a succession of events with no first member? How can an eternal will relate to an act that comes into being? Does perpetual agency undermine freedom, or might it be an expression of freedom? And then there is another question, different from all of these: Why did creation not occur before the moment at which it began?

This final question loses its meaning once we recognize that an interval prior to creation can only be conceived within time, and that absolute nonexistence contains no hours, days, or ages. The other questions do not disappear so easily. They remain at the heart of metaphysical inquiry.

This may explain why the issue has endured for centuries without final resolution. Reason finds itself attempting to satisfy several demands that are difficult to reconcile. It wants a beginning that prevents an infinite regress, yet it also wants an explanation for that beginning that does not make it arbitrary. It wants a perfect agent whose activity was never preceded by deficiency or inactivity, while at the same time preserving a genuine meaning of choice rather than reducing divine action to necessary causation. Every theory that succeeds in preserving some of these ideas finds itself required to explain what follows from them elsewhere.

The central point, therefore, is that one part of the question may have no proper object; this does not mean that the entire problem has been solved. The confusion begins when nonexistence is turned into an extended period of time, so that we imagine a duration lying behind the world and passing before creation occurred, even though absolute nonexistence contains no time by which delay could be measured. Anyone who asks, “Why did God not create earlier?” must first explain where this “earlier” is supposed to exist if time itself is among the things whose origin is being examined.

Once this illusion has been removed, the deeper and more significant questions remain: the beginning of time, the continuity of action, infinite succession, will, and choice. Perhaps part of the importance of the problem lies in what it reveals about reason itself. Human reason can think only through tools acquired from experience of the world, and yet it attempts to use those same tools to think about the origin of the world, the limits of time, and what lies beyond experience. At such boundaries, not every failure to produce an answer necessarily reflects a deficiency in knowledge. Some difficulties may arise from the nature of the question itself and from the limits of the conceptual instruments in which the question has been formulated.

Correcting the temporal form of the question therefore does not by itself settle the problem of the world’s origin. It removes an assumption that may be responsible for a significant part of the difficulty: there is no meaningful comparison among times

supposedly preceding the world if no such prior time exists in reality. The question of how an eternal will relates to an act that comes into being, and the question of perpetual divine agency and its relation to freedom, remain genuine metaphysical problems. It is precisely in their answers to these questions that the paths of the theologians, the philosophers, and Ibn Taymiyya diverge.

Perhaps the task of philosophy at such boundaries is not to rush to silence the question, but to distinguish between a question that awaits an answer, a question that first requires correction, and a question whose very formulation reveals the limits of the reason that asks it.

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